

To whom do we preach? To whom are we called to preach? Certainly we are called to proclaim Good news far and wide, broadly and deeply into the world.

But first, it seems to me, we are called to preach to a congregation, a community of God's people who belong – to church, to one another, people who have at one time or another publicly declared their faith in Jesus Christ and their intention to follow him. There is, of course, a wide, wide diversity in them. Some are hot, red hot in their faith; eager every week to hear a word from the Lord, eager and open to be challenged, ready to march forward in obedient service. How many are they? Probably not many. Different for every

congregation, but probably not many. Some are cool: some aren't sure what they believe anymore, some aren't sure they believe at all. Some are there because it is easier to attend than to disrupt a family ritual, or to try to explain to wife or husband why worship isn't working. Some are neither hot nor cold, but like the saints in Laodicea – lukewarm – the ones the Lord threatens to spew out. The lukewarm are probably the majority. And, of course, there are those in each category who bring a heavy burden with them. Frederick Buechner admonishes the preacher never to forget that: the barber whose books are such a mess and his efforts to create a clean bottom line such a failure, facing the

possible end of his career, beginning to think about taking his life; the teenager who thinks she might be pregnant, the middle-aged man having an affair and wallowing in guilt at the same time he's planning a next meeting with his lover, a woman who finds herself going through the motions of her marriage, the passion long gone, boredom now the everyday life.

The congregation in the pews Sunday morning is who the sermon is for, first. Is it any wonder that sermons on grace, on God's unconditional love, sermons that reframe and retell that ageless story of a father waiting at home for a vagabond child to come to his senses, are always relevant? That sermon that reframes and retells the story of a

father who stands in the doorway every day, first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening, scanning, watching the road all the way to the horizon, waiting: the father who one day sees a familiar profile that he can recognize in the distance; his son – the father who throws caution to the wind – along with his stately dignity, pulls up his robes – and runs – runs down that road and when his son stammers his well-rehearsed apology, opens his strong arms and folds his lost son into his embrace. Is there any wonder that sermons on grace and forgiveness and reconciliation are received like cool water to women and men whose throats are dry and parched? The preacher thinks, “not again. I can’t

preach it again,” and then is humbled that it is the word they came to hear.

Henri Nouwen traveled to the Hermitage in St. Petersburg to see Rembrandt’s magnificent painting of that moment, received permission to remain with the painting for days, sat and pondered and prayed and wrote a luminous book, The Return of the Prodigal, the young man, one shoe falling off, wet tattered and torn, abject, remorseful, humble. And that strong parent, bending over his kneeling child, hands resting on his shoulders. As he sat quietly before the painting Nouwen discovered a detail most viewers miss. The father’s hands are quite different. Rembrandt painted one hand square with stubbly, thick,

masculine fingers. The other hand is graceful, the fingers are tapered. It is a woman's hand, a mother's hand.

The people who come to hear the preacher need Good News, every one of them, no matter who they are, or their station in life.

And they need challenge as well. The flip side of grace is responsibility. Take up your cross and follow me, he said. If you save your own life you will lose it and if you lose your own life for my sake you will find it, he said. They need that too. It is every bit as life giving as the word of unconditional love.

The first and most important commandment he said is actually two. "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength – and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." You have life – in order to give life. You are loved in order to love – your neighbors, the ones whose need is immediate and visible, the ones right in front of your eyes that the world discards and passes by.

After talking about it for fifty years – after finally coming to terms with God's unconditional love – for, of all people, me – I concluded that, just as love for God and love for neighbor are together the essential moral imperative, so grace and responsibility are our concept. Jesus, Walter

Brueggemann said, invented a new word the day the lawyer asked him about the most important commandment. The new word was “God-neighbor.” So the Christian’s ethical compass is grace – responsibility.

It is in the churches that one encounters an alternative to the radical individualism that is a hallmark of our time. It is in the church and the preacher’s sermon that one hears a challenge to the rampant, market-driven, consumer-oriented economy which is overwhelming North American culture. I don’t know how much attention you pay to American politics, the current brouhaha over the Affordable Care Act. That legislation’s intent is to address the reality that over the years a

disgraceful percentage of the American population doesn't have health insurance and no access to adequate health care. What poor people, without insurance do when they are sick is go to the Emergency Room of a local hospital, most of which – by law – cannot refuse to see them. And so, in the waiting area of the Emergency Department of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, a large urban health care center near where I live will contain people with the usual broken arms and sprained ankles, and lacerations from slicing an onion with a sharp knife, to cases particular to the city, drug overdoses, gun shot and knife wounds, but also an elderly man with a respiratory problem, a baby with a high fever, a girl with a persistent cough.

They come to the Emergency Room because they don't have health insurance and thus do not have a primary care physician, a Family Doctor. The Affordable Care Act intends to make it possible for everyone to have health insurance, with provisions to help those who cannot afford to pay the premiums. Its goal is universal health care – but no one says it that way – it sounds too – well, Canadian.

The current furor exposes a deep rift in our culture. To be sure, the difficulties we are having with the web site people are supposed to use to enroll in the new program are exacerbating the situation. But the passionate opponents of the effort are arguing, on principal, that we, as a

people, a nation, do not have responsibilities for one another. The Tea Party phenomenon expresses, in my mind, a neo-individualism that turns its back on the common good in the name of the individual's autonomy.

It is the preacher's task, I believe, to speak into that morass an alternative word, a challenging word. We are all in this together. We are responsible for each other and to each other. We – those of us who sit in church pews together are under orders to love God with everything in us and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

It is from their preacher that people hear an odd word – that the chief end of human life is not to earn, levy, consume as much as possible – our

chief end is rather to glorify God and to enjoy God – which mean, I believe, to live together in peace and justice as God's beloved children forever.

The congregation needs to hear that the very existence of churches, small, medium and large; the very existence of these unique communities is testimony to a truth – that human beings are created for life in community, not life alone; that our obligation to one another balances and sometimes our personal rights, our autonomy.

The late Robert Bellah, in his classic study, Habits of the Heart, exposed the way post-modern individualism has crept into religion. His famous interview with a young California woman by the name of Sheila – has become Sheilaism – Sheila

famously said that her religion didn't have anything to do with a church. It was rather her own little voice. So every one of us has met for pre-marital - the couple who announce that they are spiritual, but not religious, which means - religion my own little voice, not the church, Good Lord, not the church.

Every one of us at some point wanted to say - this isn't about you. The church is the point, the people God created and creates and live faithfully in the world. It isn't even your wedding - it is the church's wedding and you are requesting that the church, no - the church's person - preside. Who hasn't wanted to unload on Kevin who announces

with pride that he hasn't been in church for years, but certainly believes in the Man Upstairs?

There is another thing the congregation needs to hear from the preacher, and it is that the church is precious: that God loves the church, even their church First Church by the Gas Station, with its creaky pews and worn out carpet and worrisome budget deficit. You know, every day someone tells our people that the church is a losing enterprise, that the day of the church has come and gone, that they are wasting their time in the church, wasting their energy attending its endless meetings, wasting their resources supporting it. Every day they read that the mainline churches are all losing members, that our profile isn't half what it used to

be. Every day they read something about the church, the conduct of its clergy, that embarrasses them, makes them feel , makes them wonder.

The fact is – the churches are changing. The mainline church is so much smaller and weaker than it once was that it is reasonable to ask whether the term mainline itself is accurate.

An article from the Religious News Service in the current issue of the Christian Century asks, “If it is not ‘mainline,’ what is it?” Cathy Lynn

Grossman, the RNS reporter wonders if there is not a better name for Mainline Protestants. “How about vintage Protestants?” she proposes. “Or the VPCC – Vanishing Progressive Protestant Church?” A number of religious leaders were

surveyed and asked what we should be called, if not mainline. Suggestions included: “Liberal Church,” “Liberationist Church,” “Old Time Church.” My favorite was “Grandma’s Church.”

It is time for a new term. Mainline implies privilege, a trendsetter. The term came originally from the Mainline of the Pennsylvania Rail Road, running west through the wealthy suburbs of Philadelphia – the line commuters rode to and from the banks and law firms of Old Philadelphia, from elite communities of elite upper middle and upper class white American families. Bryn Mawr, Bala Cynwyd, Swarthmore, Harverford.

Well, for one thing, there is no more PRR and the mainline isn’t what it used to be in American

culture. I rather like Progressive as a describer.
Better yet is Ecumenical. So my choice would be
Progressive Ecumenical Protestant Church.

Whatever we call it – its place in North American
Culture has changed and is changing.

I think the preacher needs to stop wringing his/her hands, stop lamenting our lost grandeur, stop playing the numbers game altogether. After all, who other than Constantine and his millions of followers ever thought it was the church's mission to win, to dominate, to rule? Who ever thought that the way to measure a church's faithfulness, effectiveness, its very validity – was by numbers? It's a western capitalist economy game, of course.

means best, right, good. "The one with the most toys wins," the bumper sticker announces. It's hard to resist the game. Ministers sometimes play it openly, shamelessly, finding ways to compare membership and budgets, working into casual conversation the burdens of managing a

robust, growing church. All my life I have been pulled up short by words the pastor of my family's church said to me in the Charge to the Pastor in my ordination 50 years ago. He said – "John: Jesus does not call you to be successful. He calls you to be faithful." You and I may think that the measure of our ministry is success – numerical success, financial success. It isn't. It never was. It never will be. We are called to be faithful. I was sitting in a seminar being led by Cleo LaRue, the fine Homiletics Professor from Princeton Theological Seminary. Why don't you White Protestants (LaRue's ethnic background is Jamaican and French) – Why don't you white mainline Protestants just stop counting? Why don't you

remember and celebrate and thank God for all the good things you have done and are doing.

That's beginning to happen, by the way. An American historian, not a church person, David Hollinger has written a book about it - - in which he says that Progressive Protestants have been very effective, have succeeded - (there's the words!) in influencing values and public policy. We are the ones who advocated, argued and fought for human rights, for universal education and health care. We are the ones who have paid attention to creation - the environment, the moral imperative of stewarding it responsibly and handing it to our children, clean, viable, safe: and

the immorality, the sin against the creator of
despoiling, trashing it.

Change is happening. Something is emerging and
it is not altogether clear what it is.